

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Building Revolution in the South:
The Southern Conference Educational Fund and the New Communist Movement, 1968-1981

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By
Douglas W. Michel
1159

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*It's a cruel hard world tonight, my friends
but the sun will be rising soon
The red sunlight of the morning will announce
the working class rising in the streets.*

*We've toiled all our lives in the factories
our sons have died in their wars
With hatred we'll fight, in joy we will win
Our new world is coming soon¹*

On September 5, 1975, in the small town of Eastabuchie, Mississippi, over three hundred activists, organizers, and workers from 50 different organizations met at the Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association headquarters for the first Fight-Back Conference by the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). Bob Zellner, the new Executive Director of SCEF oversaw a crowd of hopeful radicals and potential recruits in what many others at the conference considered the next new U.S. communist party, the October League (Marxist-Leninist).² A few months earlier, the OL had consolidated their position in the leadership of SCEF and had, they argued, saved the organization from a crisis and internal fracturing. Now it seemed SCEF was a leading force for galvanizing southern progressives who worked in factories, as woodcutters, in prison justice and anti-poverty organizing. This aggressive transformation from SCEF's founding roots, which stretched back to 1938, reflected the politics of the New Communist Movement in the mid-1970s. The militant posture of the OL to develop a new southern communist wing was fueled by the urgency of a predictive third world war between the two superpowers (the U.S. and USSR), the development of other "dangerous and false" communist groups, and the special oppression of southern blacks.

¹ Janet Sloan, "Red Sunlight," *Class Struggle: Journal of Communist Thought by the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)* 8 (Fall 1977): iii.

² October League (Marxist-Leninist) will be abbreviated as "OL" at times for an easier read. New Communist Movement groups distinguished themselves with (Marxist-Leninist) or other titular words to imply that other groups, mainly the Communist Party USA, were not true Marxist-Leninists and had succumbed to "revisionism." Refer to Appendix A for a list of abbreviations.

The meeting of radicals on the weekend of September 5th represented a culmination of several months of internal struggles over one of the most important progressive organizations in the South. Intense conflicts among leftists regarding ideology, organization, and practice were part and parcel of the New Communist Movement. The takeover of SCEF by the October League and the progression of southern radicalism typified the New Communist Movement's apex. This climax in the southern NCM was revealed through the strategy and tactics of the OL in its efforts to lead social justice movements in urban areas like Atlanta and in rural areas, such as southern Mississippi. They attempted to establish themselves as the vanguard of the working class and the oppressed in the South through the Southern Conference Educational Fund. The trajectory of the OL from 1971 to 1981 went from coalition work and party-building to an effort to command broad-based southern activism. By the end of the 1970s, SCEF became alienated from southern workers and the urban poor due to partisan actions and ideological highbrowism. The emphasis on internationalism and ideological purity, along with sectarian practices and a spirit of voluntarism, paved dead ends for the October League as they tried to vigorously organize their way to revolution.

The Civil Rights Movement and the development of the New Left in the South have overshadowed the New Communist Movement in popular memory. Elements of the Civil Rights Movement adopted a more militant posture in response to the failure of southern whites to unequivocally and publicly oppose Jim Crow laws and the use of terror against the black population. Racial tensions, xenophobia, and red-baiting blacks³ intensified in the South during the 1970s due to the steady enforcement of federal civil rights legislation. As historian Jason

³ The FBI, segregationists, and many other whites often scapegoated blacks in the Civil Rights Movement as communists or sympathizers. This red-baiting continued well into the 1970s and was used to discredit civil rights, social justice movements, and raise suspicion of black activists. As such, black red-baiting served as both an anti-communist and a racist attack. See Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2006).

Sokol notes, for whites, the Civil Rights Movement “snapped the thin thread that connected stereotypes to truths.”⁴ They “often lived under the spell of their own collective memory.”⁵ This meant that while many blacks organized for human rights, the majority of southern whites identified with their own segregated communities, be it in mill towns or suburban neighborhoods, and not with protests in the streets.⁶ For many Americans, popular memory has clung to the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. as the Civil Rights Movement’s beginning and end.⁷ On the contrary, King’s assassination in 1968 did not end civil rights, but signified a new beginning in the struggle. That year “Black rebellions erupted in more than 100 cities” and 70,000 National Guardsmen were called to restore order across the nation.⁸ Organizations such as SCEF and more militant Black Nationalist movements from the late-1960s continued to vigorously challenge racism and segregation well into the 1970s. For many white southerners, the 1970s “told a story of the civil rights movement’s influence on American life.”⁹ Though limited to certain areas of the South, this story also includes the New Communist Movement and its effect on southerners’ perceptions of identity, racism, and poverty.

Through what little research that has been done on the New Communist Movement, historians have noted a sort of collective amnesia, or a “conspiracy of silence,” from those who participated in this movement.¹⁰ In studying and conducting oral histories with participants, this unfortunate occurrence is not surprising when one recognizes the movement’s provocative content. Activists were joining well-regulated, sometimes semi-clandestine and militaristic

⁴ Sokol, 3-4.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Irwin Kilbaner, *Conscience of a Troubled South: The Southern Conference Educational Fund, 1946-1966*, (Brooklyn: Carson Publishers Inc., 1989), 1.

⁸ Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*, (New York: Verso, 2006), 1.

⁹ Sokol, 15.

¹⁰ A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States*, (New York: Autonomedia, 1988), xii.

organizations of Marxist-Leninist cadre bent on overthrowing the government.¹¹ Historian Monica Waugh-Benton, in her study of a strike wave in 1972 in Atlanta and OL participation, was shrugged off by many while conducting her research because they had no interest in revisiting that part of their past. Some had been red-baited while trying to pursue a regular vocation.¹² In an oral history of Bob Zellner by this author, stories about the 1960s with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or the GROW project were easier remembered than ones about the mid- to late-1970s with SCEF.¹³ This also reflects the powerful effect of popular memory in former “Movement” activists. The sensitivity of this topic and the memory blockage of former participants present serious obstacles to the research of this paper.

The “conspiracy of silence” also extends into the academic community. Only within the last decade has any real critical analysis of the New Communist Movement been brought to light. Max Elbaum, himself an ex-communist of a NCM group, Line of March, published the first comprehensive history of this movement, entitled *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*, in 2003. Elbaum argues that popular memory of “the Sixties” distorts and conceals the development of political activism in the New Left as the birthing agent of a new revolutionary communist movement that led into the 1970s. This is epitomized by historian Todd Gitlin with his analysis of the early “good sixties” versus the late “bad sixties.”¹⁴ Essentially, Gitlin argues that the positive moral energy and the driving force of social movements aimed at ending racism at home and the Vietnam War abroad were fractured

¹¹ New Communist Movement historian Max Elbaum explains that Marxist-Leninist groups, foremost, practiced political activism, functioned with discipline to higher leadership bodies, had a “sophisticated division of labor and pronounced hierarchy,” planned “all aspects of political work,” and used “a measure of secrecy and security.” See Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 173-180.

¹² Monica Waugh-Benton, “Strike Fever: Labor Unrest, Civil Rights, and the Left in Atlanta, 1972” (Master’s thesis, Georgia State University, 2006), 4.

¹³ Bob Zellner, Interviewed by Douglas W. Michel, Privately held, February 27, 2009.

¹⁴ Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 9.

prematurely in 1969 by doctrinaire partisans and irrational, violent youth.¹⁵ This view not only lacks a scholarly breadth of research that addresses how the New Left developed into the 1970s, but also reflects personal value judgments by former New Left activists.¹⁶ Other historians neglect the importance of this era and its lasting effects on U.S. society, or simply succumb to imbued American anti-communism.

Historical works on American communism were created largely because of the Cold War. As McCarthyism and general panic over the “red menace” gripped the nation in the 1950s, pioneering scholars generally “regarded Communism as an anti-democratic political movement that sought to replace America’s system of democratic liberties with a tyrannical regime...”¹⁷ Theodore Draper’s *The Roots of American Communism* and *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period*, are generally considered the quintessential classics of first wave works.¹⁸ The second wave was defined through the works of liberal revisionist historians in the 1960s and 70s. They sought to undo the orthodoxy of anti-communist stigmas which they saw prevalent in the work of their forbearers.¹⁹ Historian John Earl Haynes notes that “the interpretive approaches in the third wave were highly diverse, including works that criticized the CPUSA for insufficient revolutionary vigor, some that displayed strong partisanship for Communism, others that offered admiring assessments along with mildly negative comments, and a final group that provided much more critical accounts.”²⁰ Many of these histories minimized the important role and significance of the CPUSA, besides several openly anti-

¹⁵ See Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, (New York: Bantam, 1993). Elbaum notes that the “good sixties” / “bad sixties” analogy originated from New Left historian Paul Buhle in his scholarly review of *The Sixties*.

¹⁶ Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 9. Gitlin was the president of the New Left group Students for a Democratic Society in 1963 and 1964.

¹⁷ John Earl Haynes, “Historical Writing on Communism and Anti-Communism,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2 (1): 79.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

communist histories.²¹ This insight into the historiography of American communism provides one with a better foundation for discussing the New Communist Movement.

Historical works that focus on the South's New Communist Movement are almost exclusively authored by former participants including those intimately affected by the Greensboro Massacre of 1979.²² Sally Bermanzohn's *Through Survivors Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre*, and Signe Waller's *Love and Revolution: A People's History of the Greensboro Massacre, Its Setting and Aftermath*, provide compelling and scholarly accounts of Communist Workers Party (CWP) activism. They also give context to, what appears to be in popular opinion, a bizarre tragedy. Inspired by anti-racism and anti-sexism, noted African-American historian Robin D. G. Kelley claims participation in the Communist Workers Party around the early-1980s.²³ Likewise, historian Roderick D. Bush confesses to his membership in "a disciplined Marxist organization" during the same decade.²⁴ Gradually, space for critical assessment has opened up in the last decade as historians and former participants are reminded of their former socio-political quagmire in the 1970s by the current U.S. war in Iraq and an enlivened movement by Latinos and Chicanos for immigrant rights.

The rise and development of the New Communist Movement in the South was part of a broad national movement influenced by anti-racist and anti-war activism, and the dissolution of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). The CPUSA, long the proclaimed vanguard of the

²¹ Ibid., 81.

²² The Greensboro Massacre was an important episode in Greensboro, North Carolina, in the New Communist Movement. In an act of complicity, Greensboro police let Klansmen open fire on a crowd of Communist Workers Party members and supporters who were holding a nonviolent "Death to the Klan" rally. See mentioned texts by Bermanzohn and Waller.

²³ "Let the Dreamer Awake: Talking with Robin D. G. Kelley," *Political Affairs Magazine* (February 2004): n.p. <http://www.politicalaffairs.net/article/articleview/52/> (18 March 2009).

²⁴ Roderick D. Bush, "When the Revolution Came," *Radical History Review* 90 (Fall 2004): 102.

working class, faced near extinction by 1957.²⁵ Anti-communist assaults by the U.S. government coupled with a jarring reorientation of tactics by the CP left the party in dire straits. In its reorientation, an internal purge of “ultra-left”²⁶ members clinging to a positive assessment of Joseph Stalin formed the seedbed of ex-Communists who were interested in forming a new communist party. They sought to create a party that had not watered down its revolutionary principles by following Soviet Premier Khrushchev’s policy of Peaceful Coexistence with the U.S. and the directive to try a parliamentary approach to socialism in other countries.²⁷ Several hundred stalwart communists such as Nelson Peery in California and Harry Haywood formed the Provisional Organizing Committee for the Reconstitution of a Marxist-Leninist Party (POC) in 1958.²⁸ This was the first group of the New Communist Movement.

Chiefly, the majority participants in the New Communist Movement formed out of a broad base of revolutionary sentiment from young activists. By the watershed year of 1968, young activists were turning toward revolution and Marxism-Leninism as a predictive “science” to forge a new, more democratic society.²⁹ Socioeconomic class became central to this era of brooding leftists. New Leftists espousing Marxism believed that class was the most important exploitative condition within American society, where other oppressions, such as race and gender, intersected. Marxist youth were inspired by and developed their ideas from international events. The superpower posture of Moscow, which became embarrassingly apparent in the Prague Spring invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, helped turn popular opinion of New Leftists

²⁵ See Joseph R. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1972); and Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Are You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

²⁶ “Ultra-left,” in Marxist terms, is used to assign a particular individual or group as ideologically too far to the left of “correct,” or centrist, Marxism-Leninism. Conversely, “right opportunist” means too far to the right.

²⁷ Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 130-131.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

away from supporting the Soviet model.³⁰ Finally, the appeal of contemporary Third World liberation struggles, particularly with the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF), resonated among people of color and youth.³¹

This shift in focus on Third World struggles against First World hegemony, particularly guided by the ideology and experience of the Communist Party of China, gave way to a Marxist variant dubbed by Elbaum as “Third World Marxism.” This formation broke with Eurocentric Marxism with an emphasis on “sympathy for militancy, confrontational tactics, and armed self-defense.”³² This terminology, while helpful, is an academic construct of what new communists regarded as anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism, or true Marxism-Leninism in the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. The Soviet repudiation of Stalin (or ideological “revisionism”),³³ the Sino-Soviet split, along with the global impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, made study of Mao Zedong Thought and sloganeering from his “Little Red Book” central to the New Communist Movement.³⁴ This movement of young communists discarded career opportunities to go into factories and other “proletarian jobs” to organize for revolution.³⁵ This would prove difficult, particularly in the South, where most workers were not as concerned with revolution, ideology, or international events.

In the South, militant New Left organizations like SNCC, Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were breeding grounds for the

³⁰ Max Elbaum, “What Legacy from the Radical Internationalism of 1968?” *Radical History Review* 82 (Winter 2002): 40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 41.

³³ Revisionism, in Marxist terms, means the ideological revising of Marxism-Leninism. This was one of the main catalysts of the NCM. New communists declared that Nikita Khrushchev’s speeches at the 20th and 22nd Party Congresses in the USSR had laid the foundations for ideological revisionism by repudiating Stalin. They also cite the text by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement*, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), as the seminal work on combating this trend of modern revisionism. See Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 130-131.

³⁴ Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 45-46, 62-63, and 207-212.

³⁵ Kieran Walsh Taylor, “Turn to the Working Class: The New Left, Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement, 1967-1981” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2007), 68.

New Communist Movement.³⁶ One excellent example of this transformation from New Left to Marxist politics was Lyn Wells. Wells grew up in Maryland outside of Washington D.C. and was involved in political activism as a young teenager under the tutelage of SNCC leader, and future D.C. mayor, Marion Barry. By the late-1960s, she went further South “for personal and political reasons,” eventually joining SSOC.³⁷ As former SDS activist (and future October League chairman) Mike Klonsky remembered, “she had this populist tinge which made her really good at communicating with truck drivers and other white workers. She was one of the few of us who listened to country music.”³⁸ During Wells’s time in SSOC, the organization attempted to reclaim Confederate symbols and give them a progressive, anti-racist meaning.³⁹ Their “rebel” ideology against Yankee imperialism attempted to attract and reform southern whites, of which SDS strongly disapproved. By the time of its factionalization in 1969, SDS purportedly swallowed SSOC to “rid it of its backwards tendencies.”⁴⁰ SDS’s Revolutionary Youth Movement II (RYM II), one of the direct forbearers of the NCM, was led by Klonsky and others to combat narrow student power demands in favor of internationalism and building for revolution.⁴¹ In the wake of SDS and SSOC’s dissolution, various Marxist study circles and RYM II collectives, from Klonsky’s in Los Angeles to Lyn Wells’s in Atlanta, formed the future network of the October League and New Communist Movement.⁴²

³⁶ For a history of SDS, see Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS: The Rise and Development of Students for a Democratic Society*, (New York: Random House, 1973); and for SSOC, see Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

³⁷ Leon Fink, “When Community Comes Home to Roost: The Southern Milltown as Lost Cause,” *Journal of Social History* 40 (1): 122.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁹ SSOC’s symbol was a Confederate flag with two clasping hands, one black and one white, superimposed. For Wells, the flag “stood on equal footing with the interlocked hands.” SSOC claimed to use anti-racism and fuse it with “positive elements of the Confederacy—bravery, loyalty, and devotion of southern whites who took up arms to fight, not for slavery, but for their families and homes.” Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 193.

⁴⁰ Fink, 122.

⁴¹ Mike Klonsky, “Toward a Revolutionary Youth Movement,” *New Left Notes*, Jan 8, 1969, Boxed Newspapers Collection. Box 259, Folder “1969.” Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

⁴² Taylor, 71 and 74-75.

The influence of the Black Panther Party, among other post-1968 revolutionary organizations led by people of color, was indispensable in the genesis of the New Communist Movement, particularly in the South. Anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism “struck its deepest roots in communities of color.”⁴³ A host of ethnically-exclusive radical groups rejected social integration into white America and instead emphasized self-determination. These groups included La Raza Unida for Chicanos, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) for African-Americans, the Young Lords Party for Puerto Ricans, and the American Indian Movement.⁴⁴ As Harold Cruse observed in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, revolutionary nationalism grew throughout the 1960s and into the 70s. Those following the legacy of Robert F. Williams’s armed self-defense in black communities, such as the RAM protégé Huey P. Newton, turned to Mao’s ideology and infused it with revolutionary nationalist Third World struggles against white supremacy and imperialism.⁴⁵ As Roderick Bush explains, “Maoism has exerted a tremendous attraction for people of color who have been victims of racist humiliation in the pan-European world, especially in the United States. For many of us, Maoism stood with the ‘wretched of the earth.’”⁴⁶ People of color, particularly blacks in the South, developed nationalist critiques in response to what they saw as the failure of the liberal, integrationist Civil Rights Movement.

The October League’s strategy in the South was built through their experience organizing in urban areas like Atlanta. The Georgia Communist League (Marxist-Leninist), based in Atlanta, was a local communist collective that was later integrated into October League in

⁴³ Elbaum, “What Legacy,” 42.

⁴⁴ Bush, 103.

⁴⁵ For a history of Robert F. Williams’s influence on Black Power and the South, see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and for RAM and the influence of Mao Zedong on black radicals, see Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, “Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution,” *Souls* 1 (4): 6-41.

⁴⁶ Bush, 110.

1972.⁴⁷ John Fletcher, an ex-OL member, confirmed that October League specifically targeted Atlanta as a strategic organizing center.⁴⁸ The GCL developed a significant following from their work in organizing in local factories, such as Mead Packaging Corporation, and through coalition work with other southern radicals like Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). By the late-1960s, a rejuvenated labor movement was in full swing, where there were “more and harder fought strikes in 1969 and 1970 than there had been in any year since 1946.”⁴⁹ Atlanta was no exception and reached a high crest of wildcat strikes in the fall of 1972. The uprising of workers was fueled by the social and political climate of Atlanta where “black workers collectively endured racism and unequal conditions” while their grievances to union leaders were ignored.⁵⁰ The constant racial discrimination in three corporations—Nabisco, Sears, and Roebuck and Mead Packaging Corporation—was no longer tolerated by the workers.⁵¹

Mead was the first major battleground for the October League in the South. Sherman Miller, one of the few black communists in OL, led the group of strikers in the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers. Miller was vigorously slandered and red-baited in the *Atlanta Constitution-Journal*, but was still supported by the majority-black strikers at Mead in a 95% approval vote to have him remain as chairman of the Caucus.⁵² Black workers and the OL struggled against the local union, which called an end to the wildcat strike, because blacks lacked representation in a factory that was majority African-American. Miller and the OL took this

⁴⁷ See October League, *Statement of Political Unity Between the Georgia Communist League and the October League*, Los Angeles: October League, 1972. “Publications relating to October League (Marxist-Leninist),” Organizational File: October League (M-L), Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

⁴⁸ Waugh-Benton, 4.

⁴⁹ Max Elbaum, “What Legacy,” 48.

⁵⁰ Waugh-Benton, 11.

⁵¹ “In Atlanta: Workers Fight Back,” *The Call* 1 (October 1972): 1. Boxed Newspapers Collection, Box 72, Folder “1972-1974,” Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

⁵² “Interview: Mead Strike Leader,” *The Call* 1 (November 1972): 4. Boxed Newspapers Collection, Box 72, Folder “1972-1974,” Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

opportunity to educate workers that many labor bureaucrats were in the pockets of big business, and there needed to be a genuine movement of rank-and-file workers to fight back against racial oppression and exploitation.⁵³ The “strike wave of Atlanta” was recognized nationwide by leftists who were impressed by OL’s central role in leading the Mead strike.

The October League also developed a rural strategy. Because they were instructed to prioritize urban areas like Atlanta, they relied on developing regional contacts to build their organization in the countryside. Bob Zellner was one of their important contacts who would greatly influence this strategy. While a young activist at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama, Zellner was initially introduced to the Southern Conference Educational Fund through its longtime leader Anne Braden.⁵⁴ As the son of an Alabama Klansman, he was attracted to political activism through studying civil rights, meeting Dr. King, and becoming aware of the entrenched racism in his community and in the South.⁵⁵ He was expelled as a white from SNCC in 1967 following leader Stokely Carmichael’s movement of the organization in the direction of Black Nationalism.⁵⁶ Zellner then moved to New Orleans among other SCEF members to head up the Deep South Education and Research Associates.⁵⁷ His first campaign through SCEF was the GROW project, Grass Roots Organizing Work, in rural towns such as Laurel, Mississippi.⁵⁸

GROW organized poor whites in the rural Deep South, many of whom were well-accustomed to the Ku Klux Klan in their communities. In Zellner’s experience, “the last thing that changes with white southerners is their rhetoric,” so he judged white southerners by their

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Zellner interview, 1.

⁵⁵ Bob Zellner with Constance Curry, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek: A White Southerner in the Freedom Movement*, (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2008), 48-60.

⁵⁶ Zellner felt no personal animosity for his exclusion as a white, but disagreed with the policy. He sometimes visited one of the last chairmen of SNCC, H. Rap Brown, who was jailed in New Orleans. Brown said, “Zellner, it’s kind of ironic that we kicked your ass out of SNCC and now you’re the only one who will come and see me.” See Zellner with Curry, 290-296.

⁵⁷ Zellner with Curry, 300.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 302.

deeds rather than words.⁵⁹ Like other activists imbued in Marxism, Zellner used a materialist approach when organizing reforming Klansmen, focusing on concrete advantages of black-white unity rather than appealing to Christian brotherhood.⁶⁰ His organizing work paid off, with “working class rallies with as many as two thousand black and white people out in a cow pasture—old Mississippi rednecks with the whip antennas and [George] Wallace stickers on their trucks, standing next to black folks, all of them talking about how the power structure was holding them down.”⁶¹ This enticed OL leaders, among others in the NCM, to recruit Zellner for organizing Deep South trade unionists and reforming Klansmen.⁶²

The initial stage of October League’s involvement with SCEF developed out of a mutual interest in uniting with progressives and radicals to broaden their support base and push political organizations leftward through grassroots organizing. The Southern Conference Educational Fund was established as the educational wing of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in 1946. The most prominent leaders in SCEF of the 1960s and 70s were Carl and Anne Braden. The Bradens lived in Kentucky where Anne developed the *Southern Patriot* newspaper to build white support for progressive causes.⁶³ They came under attack in 1954 by the Kentucky House on Un-American Activities Committee for selling their home to an African-American couple, but the indictment was used to attack their alleged ties to the Communist Party.⁶⁴ The Bradens became synonymous with SCEF throughout this period because of their leading role in supporting trade union struggles and their work in Civil Rights Movement.

⁵⁹ Zellner with Curry, 307.

⁶⁰ Zellner interview, 7.

⁶¹ Zellner with Curry, 305.

⁶² Zellner interview, 5.

⁶³ Catherine Fosl, “‘There Was No Middle Ground,’: Anne Braden and The Southern Social Justice Movement,” *NWSA Journal* 11 (3): 37.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

SCEF had fundamental problems that weakened its political work. Perhaps the most important of its problems was its overwhelmingly white membership in a region historically home to African-Americans. Secondly, SCEF's ideals did not find resonance with the rising current of the New Left in the South. For young activists, SCEF was part of the old Left, mainly influenced by the CP, and it supported liberal positions on black integration.⁶⁵ When young Marxists like Zellner pressed Anne Braden for her views on the CP, they were frustrated by its lack of leadership within the Civil Rights Movement.⁶⁶ The generational and ideological gaps between the southern old Left, represented by the leadership in SCEF, and the new militancy of younger organizations were sources of serious conflicts within the organization.

In 1973, an incident occurred that brought this conflict into sharper focus. Four leading SCEF members, including Executive Director Helen Greever, were kidnapped by the Louisville chapter of the Black Panther Party.⁶⁷ While the details surrounding the event remain obscure, the conflict gravitated around white-black antipathies in the Louisville community and ideological tensions between the New Left and the old Left represented by the Communist Party leadership in SCEF. As Zellner recalls, the "way it played out in Louisville, which became very crucial to SCEF's functioning, was that the CP operatives in Louisville crossed purposes with members of the Panther party."⁶⁸ Anne Braden described the situation in her nearly two dozen page essay on her resignation from the SCEF staff. The immediate contact of police by the Interim Committee of SCEF to prosecute the Panthers was, in her opinion, "just as wrong, just as

⁶⁵ Zellner interview, 3.

⁶⁶ Braden told Zellner that "it was not the policy of the Communist Party to get involved in the Civil Rights Movement." This meant that while the CP and their members in SCEF could support civil rights, it is believed that they did not develop any coordinated campaign or leadership in the movement around the late-1950s to early-60s. Zellner interview, 4.

⁶⁷ Anne Braden, "Re: My resignation from the staff," Nov. 13, 1973. Cedric Belfrage Collection, Box 3, Folder 3A, Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

⁶⁸ Zellner interview, 2.

short-sighted, just as corrupt as blaming the three men who carried out the kidnapping.”⁶⁹

Sensitive to criticism and attacks on the CP, Braden was sure that “deeply intertwined with this is the fact that three of the scapegoats of the organization chosen are members of the CP, and the fourth is believed to be...”⁷⁰ This crisis would be remembered by NCM partisans as deep-seated white chauvinism of the CP inside SCEF. The OL would come to use this to root out the CP and transform SCEF into their main vehicle for organizing in the South.

By the summer of 1975, the October League had maneuvered their way into the leadership of SCEF in a supposed attempt to rectify past errors of racism, irresponsible political leadership, and to combat reformist and sectarian tendencies within the southern social justice movement. Notes from the Interim Committee (IC) of SCEF, the leading administrative body, revealed that many resigned from SCEF after the Black Panther Party debacle.⁷¹ In the IC meeting on June 21, 1975, the question of an “October League takeover” became apparent. Bob Zellner declared that “People will not allow SCEF to wither and die... I don’t relate to people who lose a political struggle and then try to destroy the organization.”⁷² Zellner was instated as Executive Director in a heated vote that led to a walkout led by the old director, Walter Collins, during the last Board meeting.⁷³ Zellner gave assurances that “OL is not going to take over SCEF,” and that it was former staff led by CP supporter Ken Lawrence “who made a motion to include himself” when Collins was voted out of power.⁷⁴ This signified a display of no

⁶⁹ Anne Braden, “Re: My resignation from the staff,” Nov. 13, 1973, p. 2. Cedric Belfrage Collection, Box 3, Folder 3A, Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ “Minutes of SCEF Interim meeting, Nov. 17-18, Atlanta, Ga.” Folder: SCEF Minutes and Reports [Board & Interim Committee], 1970-1974, Series: Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, Southern Conference Educational Fund Records, L1991-13, Southern Labor Archives. Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta. Hereafter abbreviated as “SCEF Records.”

⁷² “Minutes of the Interim Committee meeting, June 21, 1975,” p. 1. Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

⁷³ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1.

confidence of the October League by the Communist Party and their supporters. While OL partisans claimed that the CP was sectarian, Collins and Lawrence framed it as an unprincipled move to oust the leadership. OL member David Simpson raised criticisms of the old leadership that questioned SCEF's ability to truly represent southern radicalism and provide leadership in the working class and urban poor.⁷⁵ Simpson further declared, "If there are those here who don't support SCEF, they should leave."⁷⁶ This presented a direct challenge to the old leadership rooted in the Communist Party.

While the new Interim Committee defined the terms of the transfer of power, OL took measures to ensure that their leadership and political line was maintained. At the September 4, 1976, Board meeting, members of a NCM group in Durham, North Carolina, sent eight people to weigh in their opinion on SCEF's new direction.⁷⁷ Simpson blasted the group as "disruptive" and as having "a history of wrecking" other activist groups, but put their inclusion up to a Board vote. The response by their one Board member claimed that "agreement with October League politics is becoming a requirement for membership in SCEF."⁷⁸ Despite objections from the opposing group, the Board voted to expel them along with others affiliated with the Workers Viewpoint Organization (the forerunner to CWP).⁷⁹ The OL's policy of "no united action with revisionism" applied to both the CPUSA, considered "rightist," and the exclusion of other NCM groups deemed "ultra-left," or "disruptive."⁸⁰ OL maneuvered itself into unchallenged authority over SCEF through the use of this policy as an instrument to expel others that did not agree with its politics.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ "Board meeting, Sept 4 & 5, 1976 at Federation of Southern Cooperatives Center in Epes, AL," p. 1, Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁰ Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 198.

As news circulated of the transfer of power, SCEF struggled to regain legitimacy among its traditional support base of liberals and CP supporters in the North, while it reoriented itself to lead more militant organizing efforts in the South. Financial difficulties immediately beset SCEF and were attributed to Anne Braden and the CP's public struggle against the new leadership. Braden framed it as anti-communist and "taken over by Maoists."⁸¹ However, financial reports claimed that support was "slowly building back up" because of new programs that spoke to the needs of southern people.⁸² Simpson reminded folks of the need to rebuild SCEF "so that its base is among working people and poor..."⁸³ These programs sought to reorient SCEF as a leading political organization in the South capable of galvanizing thousands of progressives and radicals.

The growing economic crisis in the mid-1970s and the end of the Vietnam War prompted SCEF to act quickly to organize a regional Fight-Back Conference. This change in strategy indicated that the October League wanted to prioritize leading political struggles and consolidate grassroots movements throughout the South. In the April 1975 issue of the *Southern Patriot*, David Simpson publicly led the call to have the regional conference set up a viable campaign.⁸⁴ States targeted included North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia—untapped areas by SCEF or OL.⁸⁵ The regional conference in Eastabuchie, Mississippi—headquarters of the Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association and an important area of the GROW project—was a successful show of

⁸¹ "Summary of SCEF Interim Committee meeting, Jan 31-Feb 1, 1976," p. 3. Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ "Board meeting, Sept 4 & 5, 1976 at Federation of Southern Cooperatives Center in Epes, AL," p. 9, Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

⁸⁴ "SCEF to Sponsor Fight-Back Conference," *Southern Patriot* 33 (April 1975), 3. ETSU Archive.

⁸⁵ "Summary of SCEF Interim Committee meeting, Jan 31-Feb 1, 1976," p. 1. Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

strength in the heart of the South.⁸⁶ The meeting supported the position that their urban and rural strategies were correct, even amidst criticism at the conference. As the *Patriot* boasted, “SCEF emerged as the organization which could coordinate these diverse struggles and build the fight-back on a southwide basis.”⁸⁷ Following the regional conference, the national conference in Chicago was attended by 1300 organizers and supporters. OL showcased its leadership through ex-CPUSA luminaries Harry Haywood, Odis Hyde, and Nanny Washburn.⁸⁸ This would be the high water mark of the October League’s ascendancy as one of the top organizations in the U.S. Left.⁸⁹

The national conference formed the National Fight-Back Organization which provided SCEF’s first regional campaign against economic recession and poverty in urban areas. This campaign was modeled after aggressive fights against the Atlanta city council led by the Workers Committee to Fight Back. For four months, the group fought against “a wave of layoffs, wage cuts, forced overtime, speedup, and cutbacks in social services.”⁹⁰ Nanny Washburn, in her seventies, was arrested by police and dragged out of the Commissioner of Labor’s office.⁹¹ Later that month, the local AFSCME union (supported by OL) “invaded city hall by the hundreds” during a city council meeting to demand an end to pay cuts and job losses.⁹² A conservative union attending the meeting attacked the fiery unionists for their “communist tactics.” When police were summoned, 60 unemployed workers outside were beaten down by state troopers.⁹³ These tactics reflected the aggressive posture of the October

⁸⁶ “Conference Builds Unity & the Fight-Back,” *Southern Patriot* 33 (September 1975): 4-5. ETSU Archives.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁸ “A Historic Event: 1300 at Fight-Back Conference,” *The Call* 4 (5): S-3. Boxed Newspapers Collection, Box 74, Folder “Call, 1976,” Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

⁸⁹ Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 199.

⁹⁰ “Employed-Unemployed Fight Back,” *Southern Patriot* 33 (February 1975): 1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

League to ferment a revolutionary spirit among the urban poor. OL saw themselves as leading the movement to fight against capitalist exploitation and poverty and hoped to replicate these strategic upheavals in SCEF on a broader scale across the South.

While a national campaign against poverty and unemployment was well underway, SCEF took special notice of a case related to their position on prison justice activism. Gary Tyler, a sixteen-year-old black youth, was tried and sentenced to death row in what many considered a racist and unfair prosecution. On October 7, 1974, Tyler was taken into custody for allegedly firing a gun out a school bus window at white classmates in a small town north of New Orleans.⁹⁴ The day at school was riddled with “racial fistfights,” until police came, separated the fights, and saw that every black get on a separate bus at the end of the school day. After shots rang out, a thirteen-year-old boy was fatally wounded.⁹⁵ While it was unclear who shot from where, the police went straight for Tyler, the county court ruled that he was guilty of murder, and sentenced him to death.⁹⁶ SCEF, along with many other activist groups in the South, saw this as a racist conviction. Prison justice advocates claimed that many incarcerated blacks, who made up a disproportionate number of inmates, were political prisoners, guilty of falling victim to a racist climate and an unfair judiciary. SCEF took the opportunity to lead work around justice for Gary Tyler.

As the Gary Tyler campaign gained momentum across the South, radical southerners came to SCEF based on their leading role. In New Orleans, a rally of 500 marched in the streets on July 26, 1976.⁹⁷ SCEF also toured with speakers on the Tyler case across the nation,

⁹⁴ Bill Crider, “Gary Tyler’s mom shuns Marxists’ aid,” *The States-Item* 100 (Dec. 9, 1976): 1. Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

covering approximately 4000 miles.⁹⁸ The Tyler campaign was initially able to unite broad sections of the southern Left, with the *Patriot* touting several thousands of signatures for a large regional demonstration, including important names like Tyrone Brooks of the SCLC and James Bond on behalf of the Atlanta city council.⁹⁹ By December 1976, there were rallies in Detroit, Pittsburgh, Boston, New York, and Chicago.¹⁰⁰ The campaign was able to draw out thousands of protestors across the South and place the issue on a national foothold. The IC agreed that the Tyler campaign was effective, with the notes explaining SCEF's political growth.¹⁰¹

SCEF's new focus on prison justice organizing reflected OL's commitment to increasing African-American support in the Black Belt South. In the early stages of the NCM, new communists turned to classic Marxist-Leninist interpretations of the National Question to reassess what they saw as bourgeois constructions of "race."¹⁰² In the South, this was particularly important because of their background in anti-racist organizing in and around the Black Belt region. This Marxist-Leninist position was articulated best in Stalin's main political treatise, *Marxism and the National Question*, and in the 1928 and 1930 Comintern Resolutions on the Negro National Question formulated by ex-CPUSA, and OL leader Harry Haywood.¹⁰³ OL organizers recognized the need for self-determination for the black nation in the Black Belt

⁹⁸ "Untitled letter on SCEF finances of Tyler campaign," Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

⁹⁹ "SCEF Calls for Massive Tyler Demonstration," *Southern Patriot* 34 (April 1976): 8. ETSU Archives.

¹⁰⁰ Bill Crider, "Gary Tyler's mom shuns Marxists' aid," *The States-Item* 100 (Dec. 9, 1976): 1. Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

¹⁰¹ "Interim Committee meeting held in Birmingham, AL, June 20, 1976 at YWCA," Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

¹⁰² The African-American National Question was hotly debated throughout the NCM. In Marxist theory, this "Question" means the definition of what constitutes a nation. "Race" was seen as a false construction of identifying a person by the color of their skin. It was argued that early anthropologists created it and used it to justify discrimination. "Oppressed nationality" became the preferred Marxist nomenclature to refer to nonwhites. October League's theory developed from theoretician Harry Haywood. See Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1976).

¹⁰³ Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist*, (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 256-280.

South, including the right to separation from the U.S. to create a black state.¹⁰⁴ OL did not focus its organizing on blacks in rural areas, but instead concentrated on Atlanta and worked through SCEF as the focal point of its efforts to organize in the most impoverished region of the U.S.

In an attempt to show transparency amidst dwindling national support and newspaper subscriptions, the new SCEF leadership published a two-page showcase of their Board meeting on September 4, 1976.¹⁰⁵ There appeared to be a genuine attempt to open communication to SCEF supporters and newly formed chapters. The inclusion of several other groups from the former New Left attempted to show that OL domineering was a fiction. However, when an international resolution regarding whether the Soviet Union was “social imperialist” was advanced by Simpson, those left in the old guard of SCEF posed it as “an effort by the OL to narrow SCEF’s base and exclude other leftists.”¹⁰⁶ The majority of participants were said to have agreed on the position of Third World liberation against the two superpowers, and the resolution was passed.¹⁰⁷ In retrospect, Zellner admits that this example of forcing intellectual conformity on fine details did not correspond to the reality of southern workers.¹⁰⁸

Members of SCEF were active participants in celebrating and creating new forms of working class and revolutionary culture. Anne Romaine was a clear example of this cultural spirit. Romaine, like her contemporaries in SCEF, was an organizer in SSOC in the 1960s. In 1966, “she and former SNCC Freedom Singer Bernice Reagon... founded the Southern Folk

¹⁰⁴ See October League, *The Struggle for Black Liberation and Socialist Revolution*, Los Angeles: October League, 1976. “Publications relating to October League (Marxist-Leninist),” Organizational File: October League (M-L), Tamiment Library Archives, New York University. As defined, the Black Belt is a rural corridor that stretches from rural eastern Virginia, through lower Georgia into the eastern region of Texas, and up the Mississippi River to Memphis. It is the highest concentration of African-Americans outside urban areas of the U.S., and was (and still is) composed of mostly former sharecropping blacks. See Appendix B for a map of how many new communists, such as those in the OL, defined the borders of the Black Belt South.

¹⁰⁵ “SCEF Board Charts New and Ambitious Course,” *Southern Patriot* 34 (September 1976): 4-5. ETSU Archives.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Zellner interview, 10.

Cultural Revival Project.”¹⁰⁹ The project celebrated traditional southern music, from Blues to Cajun to Folk, and hosted performers such as Johnny Shines, the Balfa Brothers, and Ralph Stanley.¹¹⁰ Romaine would perform for SCEF activists and supporters, swaying “the people with her beautiful folk-country style.”¹¹¹ She also wrote songs that promoted social consciousness, like her SCEF recording, “On the Line,” which was a work about the case of a black political prisoner, Joanne Little.¹¹² SCEF members also gathered for a closing song at meetings and conferences, such as the “Fight-Back” song.¹¹³ OL also participated in this celebration of the “people’s music” aimed to counter the commercialization and lack of political consciousness in popular culture.

Amidst their organizing efforts, October League, SCEF, and other new communists faced constant political violence from the far right and other new communist groups. A rival NCM group, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), attacked OL members selling their newspaper, *The Call*, outside of a General Motors plant in Framingham, Massachusetts.¹¹⁴ This reflected the OL’s idea, interpreted from Mao, that there was a “bourgeois headquarters” inside or outside the true communist party that needed to be struggled against just as much as the out-and-out reactionaries. Despite some of Zellner’s success in reforming Klansmen in the Deep South, SCEF members were often the target of Klan threats or attacks. On September 18, 1976 “two carloads of shotgun carrying Klansmen attacked a memorial program” at a Houston bookstore.¹¹⁵ After a large brick was hauled through the window, a team of security for the

¹⁰⁹ Gene Guerrero, “Anne Romaine,” *Southern Changes* 17 (3-4): 15. Southern Changes Digital Archive, Beck Library, Emory University.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ “Conference Builds Unity and the Fight-Back,” *Southern Patriot* 33 (September 1975): 4. ETSU Archives.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹⁴ “RCP Thugs Assault Call Sellers,” *The Call* 5 (18): 7. Boxed Newspapers Collection, Box 74, Folder “Call, 1976,” Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

¹¹⁵ “Klan Attacks Mao Memorial,” *Southern Struggle* 34 (September 1976):1. ETSU Archives.

memorial opened fire on the group and hit one of the Klansmen in the chest.¹¹⁶ On November 25, 1978, two white activists, Alec Valentine and Roy Gallau, passing out *Southern Struggle* newspapers were beaten and “left to die” in Guin, Alabama.¹¹⁷ SCEF took efforts to widely publicize the near-death experience and charge the state and FBI with complicity.¹¹⁸ The aggressive posture of SCEF and the OL to build a revolutionary movement collided more viciously with southern whites by the late-1970s.

By 1977, *The Call* reported that October League chairman Mike Klonsky had claimed that the reconstitution for the new communist party was well at hand. The expedition was necessary for the group to continue to develop under difficult conditions. With the constitution of the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), chairman Klonsky toasted Communist Party of China leader Hua Guofeng in 1977 in a sign of Chinese allegiance.¹¹⁹ In an issue of the CP(ML) theoretical journal, *Class Struggle*, Klonsky was quoted in an interview about the meeting: “The meeting between our Party and the leadership of the Chinese Party is significant for many reasons... the fact that the CP(M-L) has been born in opposition to the modern revisionists and the fact that it has a correct line and a line that is united with that of the other Marxist-Leninists internationally is very important.”¹²⁰ This nod to Klonsky and the CP(ML) by the CPC had possibly stroked their egos too far. In a matter of a few years, their “correct line” would be tested in their ability to survive through the latter half of the 1970s.

Even though the CP(ML) showed external strength, SCEF relied more on publishing *Southern Struggle* due to a lack of mobilizing grassroots activity across the South. The paper

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ “Klan Attacks SCEF Members,” *Southern Struggle* 36 (Nov-Dec 1978): 5. ETSU Archives. *Southern Struggle* was the new name of the SCEF paper, *Southern Patriot*, which was renamed under OL leadership in 1977.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Photo in *The Call* 4 (Aug 1, 1977). Boxed Newspapers Collection, Box 74, Folder “Call, 1977,” Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

¹²⁰ “China’s New Leap Forward is a Victory for Us All: Interview with Michael Klonsky,” *Class Struggle: Journal of Communist Thought by the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)* 8 (Fall 1977): 17-18.

was used to sell party literature, such as *Black Bolshevik* by Harry Haywood.¹²¹ It was also the main vehicle in which the CP(ML) projected its politics to southern radicals. SCEF tried to replicate its success in 1975 and called for another “Mass Fightback Conference” on June 11 and 12, 1977.¹²² The “key political question” was “for the right to self-determination for the Afro-American nation.”¹²³ Similar to the political line on Soviet “social imperialism,” the October League was, again, trying to persuade SCEF members to adopt the “finest details” of OL’s politics.¹²⁴ In SCEF’s campaign work, veteran communists such as Simpson and Wells maintained that it was sustaining activism in chapters around Houston, Tampa, Atlanta, Birmingham, Nashville, and Charleston, West Virginia.¹²⁵ However, reports showed that there was little activity beyond chapter meetings. Workers and members of SCEF were becoming harder to organize at the turn of the decade. The ease and thrust of organizing large demonstrations at the end of the Vietnam War and against the economic recession in the mid-1970s were becoming distant memories for southern progressives.

The Southern Conference Educational Fund was all but dissolved by 1981. This coincided with the internal crisis within the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), only four years after its claim as the vanguard of the U.S. working class. The last few documents from the SCEF leadership meetings suggest several criticisms of the October League for SCEF’s demise—sectarianism being highlighted.¹²⁶ Newspaper subscriptions to SCEF’s *Southern Struggle*

¹²¹ “Landmark Account of the Struggle for Black Liberation and Socialism,” *Southern Struggle* 36 (April 1978): 8. ETSU Archives.

¹²² “SCEF Calls Mass Fightback Conference,” *Southern Struggle* 35 (May-June 1977): 1. ETSU Archives.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Zellner said in reference to NCM groups and the October League: “...you can work with different organizations, but you don’t require those organizations to adopt your complete program, you know, right down the finest details.” This was an example of poor “united front” work. Zellner interview, 8.

¹²⁵ “Re: Report on visits to chapters,” Internal Communications and Staff Newsletter, 1970-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

¹²⁶ “Summary of Minutes of SCEF meeting in Atlanta, July 18-19, 1981,” Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

dramatically decreased to the point of only having one issue every two months. The paper was “put out basically with volunteer labor.”¹²⁷ Organizing the working and poor did not provide a sustainable source of income for the staff or organization. Furthermore, the paper had lost interest among its readers. The past few years of using the SCEF newspaper as a political tool for the OL had turned off many who did not care for particular and refined points of a communist vanguard. The main office and a new Interim Committee relocated to Dallas, Texas, but did not revive itself as a functional organization.¹²⁸

After Klonsky left the party in 1981, the CP(ML) underwent a rapid decline in membership. Most former members refused to join other left groups altogether. Elbaum attributes this to the CP(ML)’s dogmatism and antidemocratic practices.¹²⁹ In the case of SCEF, this was certainly the case by the end of the seventies, but the initial bottom-up approach of the OL in campaign work built a strong following and foundation to coordinate activity from the top. The implosion of the CP(ML) was unique in the NCM in that it went from the largest anti-revisionist organization to nothing in less than three years.¹³⁰ The OL was also criticized by their contemporaries as following the Chinese line too closely. Struggles against the USSR did not show the same immediacy in the U.S. South as it did in China. Adopting the same political line to struggle against “Soviet social imperialism” lacked a real purpose from southern workers, and also new communists in the U.S. As Roderick Bush mentioned, “Mao Tse-tung cautioned that revolutionaries in other countries must operate according to their own conditions and not tail after any other party.”¹³¹ This meant that simply following the most attractive political pole in

¹²⁷ “Minutes of SCEF meeting in Atlanta, Saturday Morning, July 18, 1981,” p. 1. Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

¹²⁸ “Summary of Minutes of SCEF meeting in Atlanta, July 18-19, 1981,” Minutes and reports, SCEF Board and Interim Committee, 1975-1981, Meeting Minutes, Reports, and Financial Reports, 1958-1981, SCEF Records.

¹²⁹ Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 256.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Bush, 106.

the world was not sufficient to lead a movement that had its own separate national conditions. As CP(ML) began to realize the extremely violent and destitute conditions in Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia), it became too unsettling. *The Call* editor Dan Burstein noted this and led a self-critical struggle in the CP(ML) that would eventually undo the party's ideological foundations.¹³² Under Deng Xiaoping, China united with the U.S which caused even more confusion and disillusionment in the party.¹³³ By 1981, the CP(ML) had nothing else to rest on but their ideology. When this became challenged, their membership plummeted and the organization completely unraveled in 1983.

The trajectory of SCEF and the southern New Communist Movement in the mid- to late-1970s reminds one of a tragic hero. The reserves of moral energy and progressive momentum of the 1960s had run dry by 1981. OL refounded SCEF as a “mass revolutionary movement” based in anti-racist and anti-poverty activism that aimed to galvanize millions of working people to overthrow the U.S. government.¹³⁴ In retrospect, SCEF and the OL did not come close at all to that goal. However, with relatively few cadres, the OL was able to have a strong impact on the South during this period. Workers were inspired to fight for better pay and the unemployed for the right to have a job. It may be said that the OL acted in an effort to preserve SCEF from self-destruction, but all evidence points toward an effort to build SCEF under the exclusive leadership of the October League. The overzealous and militant actions during the anti-poverty movement and the Gary Tyler campaign were unsustainable. They taxed activists and eventually sapped their support base when many were seeing that they were not winning small victories.

This voluntarism amidst arrogance on OL's part, the misapplication of Marxism, overt

¹³² For one of his first critical assessments of the 1970s, see Daniel Burstein, “Communist Movement in the 1970s: Strengths and Weaknesses,” *The Call* 9 (Jan 7, 1980): 12-13. Boxed Newspapers Collection, Box 72, Folder “1980,” Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ “SCEF Board Charts New and Ambitious Course” *Southern Patriot* (September 1976): 4. ETSU Archives.

sectarianism, and confusion over Kampuchea and China, drove SCEF and the CP(ML) to their premature death.

Along with unfavorable conditions in the U.S. and the rising tide of neo-conservatism, voluntarism was the main reason for the failure of the New Communist Movement. New communists thought that they could organize their way to revolution, “thinking that virtually anything could be accomplished if revolutionaries only had sufficient determination and correct ideas.”¹³⁵ This is at the root of why the majority of NCM groups are gone today.¹³⁶ Many uncritically charted their way toward becoming the vanguard of the American working class, while becoming increasingly disconnected from the people that they were trying to attract. While the New Communist Movement in the South had completely dissolved, many have carried on its legacy and are shop stewards for unions or labor leaders, work for non-profit organizations, or as educators in academia. As one may see in its history, the October League and SCEF vigorously challenged perceptions, ideas, and identities in the South while challenging the status quo. Their legacy may be remembered for its passionate discourse and militant activity, but succumbed to an impetuous crusade in building revolution in the South.

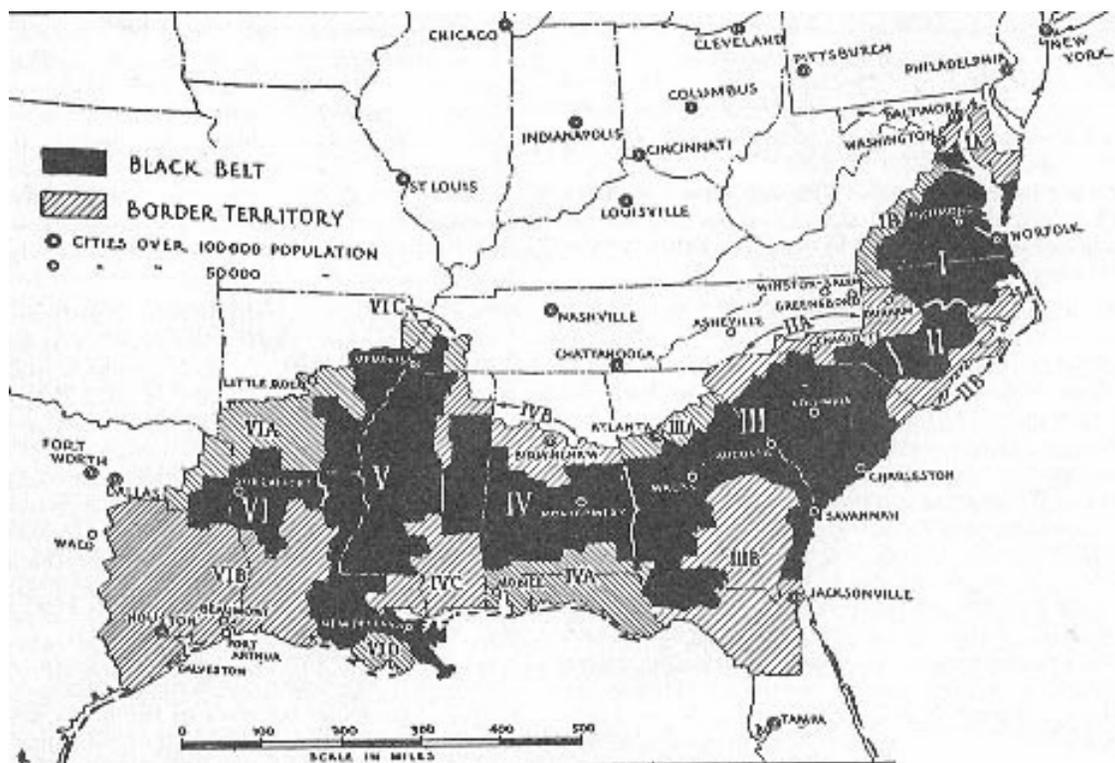
¹³⁵ Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 7.

¹³⁶ Today, there are a small number of groups that claim the heritage of New Communist Movement. The notable ones are the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, (see “Revolutionary History and Our Tasks,” *Rally Comrades*, <http://www.lrna.org/2-pt/v17ed2art2.html> (22 April 2009)); the Revolutionary Communist Party, led by Bob Avakian (see “About the Revolutionary Communist Party,” *Revolution*, <http://revcom.us/rcp-e.htm> (22 April 2009)); and two groups (who split in 1999) who claim to be the legitimate Freedom Road Socialist Organization (see “Summation on Recent Developments of FRSO,” <http://www.frso.org/about/split.htm> (22 April 2009)).

Appendix A: Abbreviations of Terms and Organizations

BPP	Black Panther Party
CP(ML)	Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), formed from the October League (Marxist-Leninist) in 1977
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPUSA	Communist Party USA, sometimes further abbreviated as “the CP”
CWP	Communist Workers Party, formed from the Workers’ Viewpoint Organization
GCL	Georgia Communist League (Marxist-Leninist)
GROW	Grass Roots Organizing Work, a project led by Bob Zellner in SCEF that ran from 1967 to approximately 1978
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
IC	Interim Committee of the Southern Conference Educational Fund
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
NCM	New Communist Movement
NLF	National Liberation Front of Vietnam
OL	October League (Marxist-Leninist), formed as a national organization from a merger between the Marxist-Leninist Collective in Los Angeles and the Georgia Communist League in 1972
POC	Provisional Organizing Committee to Reconstitute the Marxist-Leninist Party
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SCEF	Southern Conference Educational Fund
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SSOC	Southern Student Organizing Committee
RAM	Revolutionary Action Movement
RCP	Revolutionary Communist Party USA, formed out of the Revolutionary Union in 1975
RYM II	Revolutionary Youth Movement II, formed out of a split in Revolutionary Youth Movement (which was a faction of SDS) in 1969. RYM I was known as the Weather Underground.

Appendix B: The Black Belt South



Map from James Allen, *The Negro Question in the United States*, New York: International Publishers, 1938.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Braden, Anne. "Re: My resignation from the staff." Nov 13, 1973. Cedric Belfrage Collection, Box 4, Folder 3A. Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

This two dozen page essay explains and criticizes the events surrounding Louisville Black Panthers taking several SCEF leaders hostage.

Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist). *Class Struggle: Journal of Communist Thought by the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)* 8 (Fall 1977).

This is the Fall 1977 issue of the theoretical journal published by the CP(ML). It is the issue following their constitution as the vanguard party in the U.S. It contains several articles, including an interview from chairman Mike Klonsky on meeting with Chinese party officials.

Georgia Communist League (Marxist-Leninist). *The Red Worker*. Atlanta: Georgia Communist League (Marxist-Leninist). Organizational File: Georgia Communist League (M-L), folder "1971-1972." Vols. 1-2, no. 3; Oct 1971-Mar 1972. Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

This newspaper out of Atlanta is one of the earliest examples of an anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist, or Maoist, group in the U.S. South during this period. The newspaper reported both local and international news ranging from the Mead strikes of 1972 to the Cultural Revolution in China. It contains some invaluable articles about communism in the South.

Guerrero, Gene. "Anne Romaine." *Southern Changes* 17 (3-4): 15-17. Southern Changes Digital Archive, Beck Library, Emory University.

This piece in the journal of the Southern Regional Council is a eulogy and tribute to Anne Romaine on the occasion of her death in 1995. Guerrero was a leading SCEF member in the mid-1970s and personally knew Romaine from his work with her in SSOC and SCEF.

Klonsky, Mike. "Towards a Revolutionary Youth Movement." *New Left Notes*. Jan 8, 1969. Boxed Newspapers Collection. Box 259, Folder "1969." Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

Klonsky was the chairman of the OL/CP(ML) from its inception until 1981. He was instrumental in the formation of Revolutionary Youth Movement II, one of the groups that originated the New Communist Movement. This article reflects the need for the student movement to take up revolutionary aims and defeat single-issue campaign work.

Haywood, Harry. *Black Bolshevik: An Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist*. Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978.

Haywood was one of the originators of the Communist solution to “the Negro Problem” in the U.S., applying Marxism-Leninism to the Black Belt South. As a top member of October League, his autobiography was published and sold through the OL/CP(ML).

October League (Marxist-Leninist). “Publications relating to October League (Marxist-Leninist).” Organizational File: October League (M-L). Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

These publications are mainly pamphlets distributed by the OL that deal with their political line and ideology.

October League (Marxist-Leninist). *The Call*. Boxed Newspapers Collection. Box 74. Tamiment Library Archives, New York University.

The Call was the official OL newspaper where they reflected their work in urban poor, anti-poverty, anti-racism, and anti-war movements. It contains a plethora of information from local activism to international news, mainly supporting the work of the Communist Party of China and Mao Zedong.

Southern Conference Educational Fund. *Southern Patriot*. Vols. 30-34, Incomplete. Compact Stacked Periodicals. Row 91, Folder “Southern Patriot.” Charles C. Sherrod Library, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee.

This is the newspaper from one of the oldest southern activist groups dating back to 1938. SCEF reported on anti-racist efforts and radical activism in the South.

Southern Conference Educational Fund. *Southern Struggle*. Vol. 35-39, no. 11; Jan. 1977-Dec. 1981. Compact Stacked Periodicals. Row 92, Folder “Southern Struggle.” Charles C. Sherrod Library, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee.

This is the continuation of the *Southern Patriot*. The new name reflects the position of OL to change the name *Patriot*. It was argued that “patriot” carried connotations of “southern pride” and racism, which undermined their struggle to organize blacks in the South.

Southern Conference Educational Fund Records, L1991-13, Southern Labor Archives. Special Collections Department, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

This collection of materials which spans six boxes covers three series: 1) Meeting minutes, reports, and financial reports, 1958-1981, 2) Christine A. Lutz correspondence, 1978-1981, and 3) Subject and name files, 1961-1985. The material from the years 1975-1978, mainly meeting notes and minutes, is useful to gain insight into the internal dynamics of the group during OL’s takeover and their subsequent reorganization of SCEF.

Zellner, Bob. Interviewed by Douglas W. Michel. Privately held. February 27, 2009.

This is an 11-page interview done roughly over an hour by phone. Zellner discusses his role in and around SCEF during the mid-1970s and the October League.

Zellner, Bob with Constance Curry. *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek: A White Southerner in the Freedom Movement*. Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2008.

Zellner's memoir provides insight into the background of aspiring young southerners who developed radical ideas and practices during the New Left and into the New Communist Movement of the 1970s.

Secondary Sources

Bush, Roderick D. "When the Revolution Came." *Radical History Review* 90 (Fall 2004): 102-111.

This book review of Elbaum's *Revolution in the Air* contains valuable insights from one who has both studied and participated in the New Communist Movement.

Elbaum, Max. *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*. New York: Verso, 2006.

This history by Elbaum is a pioneering work that attempts to directly explore and analyze the New Communist Movement of the U.S. during its period of roughly 1968-1985. Elbaum disputes a "good sixties/bad sixties" model popularized by Todd Gitlin and instead argues that the post-1968 New Left transformed into a movement of former students who joined Marxist-Leninist groups that went into the working class, unions, and urban ghettos to organize people for socialist revolution.

Elbaum, Max. "What Legacy from the Radical Internationalism of 1968?" *Radical History Review* 82 (Winter 2002): 37-64.

Elbaum's scholarly article explores the legacy of social movements that were changed by the watershed year of 1968. It provides a rough picture of the New Communist Movement in this context.

Fields, A. Belden. *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States*. New York: Autonomedia, 1988.

Fields provides an interesting account of the New Communist Movement by analyzing the "science" of Marxism-Leninism in a historical context, and its relation of theory to practice.

Fink, Leon. "When Community Comes Home to Roost: The Southern Milltown as Lost Cause." *Journal of Social History* 40 (1): 119-145.

Fink explores the incredible story of Lynn Wells Rumley, a Southern New Leftist turned new communist and now is a Milltown preservationist.

Fosl, Catherine. "There Was No Middle Ground: Anne Braden and the Southern Social Justice Movement." *NWSA Journal* 11 (3): 24-48.

This piece focuses on Anne Braden as a powerful figure of southern social activism during the 1950s through the 70s. It delves into some of the background surrounding her leading role in SCEF, her spouse Carl, and the Braden's leadership in the organization.

Haynes, John Earl. "The Cold War Debate Continues: A Traditionalist View of Historical Writing on Domestic Communism and Anti-Communism." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2 (1): 76-115.

Haynes provides a historiographical overview of how homegrown American communism is portrayed in historical works spanning the Cold War era.

Kilbaner, Irwin. *Conscience of a Troubled South: The Southern Conference Educational Fund, 1946-1966*. Brooklyn: Carson Publishers Inc., 1989.

This is one of few books written on the Southern Conference Educational Fund. It deals with some of the background to the period that this paper focuses on.

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Michel provides a scholarly account of an often overlooked southern New Left group, the Southern Student Organizing Committee. SSOC was an integral part of the southern activist movement of the 1960s, working in concert with other groups such as SCEF and SNCC. Some former SSOC members, such as Lyn Wells, joined the October League in the early 1970s.

Kelley, Robin D. G. and Betsy Esch. "Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution." *Souls* 1 (4): 6-41.

Kelley and Esch comment on the important, radicalizing impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong Thought had on African-Americans in the 1960s and 70s. *Souls* is "a critical journal of Black politics, culture and society" published by Columbia University.

Sokol, Jason. *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2006.

This text deals with the changing perceptions of white southerners during the Civil Rights Movement. Since my topic deals extensively with this demographic, this text provides a good context to whites' reactions toward progressive and anti-racist movements in the South.

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This dissertation deals extensively with the labor movement and the New Communist Movement in the South. Chapter 2 discusses the strike wave in Atlanta of 1972 and provides useful information on the October League.

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This master's thesis centers on the role of social movements and the New Communist Movement group the October League surrounding the strike wave in Atlanta of 1972.